

Bringing hope to Batwa in education

AGAINST ODDS. The establishment of the Bwindi and Mgahinga National Parks for Mountain Gorillas in 1991 saw the eviction of the Batwa from the forests which they originally occupied. However, they are acquiring education, a small but sure step forward for the forest people to development and eliminating poverty.

BEATRICE NAKIBUUKA spoke to some of those who are for education.

Basic survival has been a struggle for the last 20 years for the Batwa. Now, education is their priority.

Her presentation in English about the Adventist Development and Relief Agency in Uganda (ADRA) was lively. She was soft spoken but bold and fluent.

At 29, Alice Nyamihanda is said to be the first Mutwa to graduate with a diploma in Development Studies at Bugema University in 2010. She attaches a lot of importance to her education and thinks of it as an escape route from poverty, discrimination and vulnerability of her community [the Batwa] which has long feared the world outside the forest.

Nyamihanda symbolises the swift shift towards development which this marginalised community has resisted for a long time. More Batwa people have been inspired by Nyamihanda's example to get an education, as a ray of hope to ending the marginalisation.

Sailing through

Her path to attaining an education has been perilous. Since primary school, Nyamihanda has often relied on the benevolence of non-governmental organisations to carry her through each academic level.

"I used to go to a community school which was free but it was very far from home, I had no books, no uniform and the non-Batwa children did not want to associate with me. They called me all sorts of names and I could only find a seat at the back of the classroom. It was only until ADRA built a school in my community that I was able to complete my primary education," she recalls.

Nyamihanda scored aggregate 27 and joined Seseme Girl's School, Kisoro but her father had died when she was nine years and mother was unable to pay her school fees.

"I got support from Bwindi Mgahinga Conservation Trust (BMCT) fund for the Batwa who paid my school fees until I completed Senior Six. I got the principle passes and got



Nyamihanda with her children. She is said to be one of the first highly educated Batwa. PHOTO BY E. NAKIBUUKA

sponsorship to Bugema University in 2007." She is now married to Isaac Oyiaga, a secondary school teacher in Kenya with whom they have two children. She is also the education officer at the United Organisation for Batwa Development in Uganda, which oversees several programmes that will see development of the community. She is also a volunteer at ADRA.

This exposure has given Nyamihanda several opportunities to travel to countries such as Thailand, America, Burundi, Congo and Rwanda.

Beneficiaries in education

More Batwa have been able to get educated because they believe this would help them attain full land rights, get employment and representation in the government, as well as be recognised as a community.

Elias Segitondo, 22, is a second-year student at Bishop Stuart University College Kabale campus pursuing a

bachelor's degree in Social Work and Social Administration. The third born in a family of four went to Viizi Primary School and like all his tribesmen; the non-Batwa children dis-

OTHER VOICES

Kenneth Turayambona, 28, graduated with a diploma in Project Management from Bishop Barham University Kabale campus in 2013. He was a translator to Scott and Carol Kellermann when they arrived in Uganda in 2001 for the Batwa Development Programme.

He was the best candidate in Kanungu District in 2003 from Bishop's Primary School where he scored aggregates five. He then went through Kabale College on scholarship and later went to Bishop Barham University. He works with the Batwa Development Programme which oversees education, acquiring land, agricultural training, spiritual outreach and other income generating activities for the Batwa people.

criminated against him. He however was able to score aggregate 22 in the Primary Leaving Exams.

Segitondo then went to Sentah College Mbarara which was too expensive so he went back to his home area. With support from UOBDU, he joined a more affordable school, Kisoro Comprehensive School until A-Level where he scored eight points.

After university, he hopes to go back to his community to help them get relief from minor diseases such as typhoid which they suffer from and also help them get better access to health and social services.

Challenges

John Maritazari Muhoza, 24, a second year teacher-in-the-making at Bishop Stuart University, in Mbarara scored 10 points at A-Level at Kisoro Vision School. He believes the opportunity for an education will enable him to empower the Batwa to be able to socialise with other people.

Muhoza says, "Our major problem has always been that we isolate ourselves and do not socialise with others. Sometimes even after we have gone to school for some time, we still do not open up to others."

He is from a family that did not get land and the situation worsened when his father died. He, however knew that acquiring education is the only way out of poverty and backwardness in his community. Seeing how far he has come in the academic journey, he recounts his bumpy journey.

"I used to walk three kilometres to Kabaya Primary School and although it was a free education, it was hard for me to even acquire a uniform. I rarely found food at home and depended on other people to provide food," he recalls.

Ray of hope

Muhoza is happy that some people in his community have established homesteads, have a piece of land to cultivate, seeds to grow their own food and rear animals for their survival. This would probably reduce the dependency syndrome of the community and improve their livelihoods, he believes.

According to Nyamihanda, more have completed O-Level and are capable of performing some formal tasks.

"I'm glad more of my people are acquiring an education which is improving their standards of life. I hope that one day we will come out of the marginalisation and discrimination struggles we face today."

